DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 310 415 CS 212 068

AUTHOR Bowman, Jim; Kahan, Bob
TITLE Reflections upon an "Atheist Epic": Madalyn Murray O'Hair and "Baltimore Sun" Reporters Comment about Coverage of the First Incidents Leading to the Supreme Court's Banning of Compulsory Prayer in Public Schools.
PUB DATE 31 Jan 89
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (72nd, Washington, DC, August 10-13, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Emotional Response; Interviews; *Journalism History; Mass Media Role; *News Reporting; *Press Opinion; Religious Conflict
IDENTIFIERS Atheism; Baltimore Sun; Journalism Research; *Media Coverage; News Reporters; O Hair (Madalyn Murray); *Religion in Public Schools

ABSTRACT

In 1960 a teenage boy, Bill Murray, refused to participate in Bible reading, and the result was a series of court cases that culminated in the 1963 United States Supreme Court decision banning compulsory prayer in public schools. To gain insight into the dynamics of journalism practiced during controversy, a case study attempts to examine the thoughts, the feelings, and the "mind-sets" of those involved by focusing upon the influence of personal factors in a charged situation. The "Baltimore Morning Sun" and the "Baltimore Evening Sun" were read for all of 1960 through 1962 when the events took place, and the three reporters (who wrote most of the copy) and Bill's mother, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, were all interviewed. Findings showed that: (1) there was an imbalance in the disproportionate amount of space given to representatives of authority and proponents of school prayer in the newspaper compared to the relative paucity of space allotted to O'Hair, Bill, and opponents of school prayer; (2) there was distortion, which linked atheism with an irrelevant issue, communism; (3) there was a quickness on the part of the press to find a stereotype for what they did not fully understand, dissent in the form of atheism; (4) the personal dislike of O'Hair interfered with the professional judgment of two of the reporters; and (5) the portrayal of O'Hair and her son by all of the reporters was uni-dimensional, that is they were seen only as dissidents and there was no sense of them as people. (Twenty-four notes are included.) (MS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED310415

Reflections upon an "Atheist Epic": Madalyn Murray O'Hair and Baltimore Sun Reporters Comment About Coverage of the First Incidents Leading to the Supreme Court's Banning of Compulsory Prayer in Public Schools

by

Jim Bowman, Master's Candidate

and

Bob Kahan, Professor of Journalism

School of Journalism

University of Missouri

Columbia, Missouri 65205

(314) 882-2880

January 31, 1989

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Bob Kahan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS212068

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Reflections upon an "Atheist Epic": Madalyn Murray O'Hair and Baltimore Sun Reporters Comment About Coverage of the First Incidents Leading to the Supreme Court's Banning of Compulsory Prayer in Public Schools

Introduction

Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the nation's best known and to some most notorious atheist, wrote a book in 1970 entitled, An Atheist Epic: Bill Murray, the Bible and the Baltimore Board of Education.' The autobiographical work is about the series of encounters and court cases that began with the problems of her then-teenage son, Bill Murray, in a Baltimore junior high school in the 1960s and that culminated in the 1963 United States Supreme Court decision banning compulsory prayer in public schools.

In her book O'Hair states:

> ...we soon found out that the American press will make a story if there is none.... With their bare faces hanging out, they [the reporters] admitted to slanted writing, suppression of news, half-truths....
>
> I must have sounded to them like an evangelistic preacher for I flayed them for their sins and admonished them to stand up like men and fight the concept of 'managed news.' The final word, however, was said, when one of them said to me, 'You could have been squashed like an ant by the school if this first article had not been juggled in a way that got it in to the news.' Another spoke up, 'Without the smear of your being a Communist and Bill being a nut, nothing would have appeared. The papers don't report the vital issues. They deal with the froth.
>
> The charge that we were Communists and that Bill was some kind of a nut were elaborated on endlessly as the school officials were given any space or time they wanted. Our denials were ignored. Even now, ten years later, I can honestly say that our side has yet to be heard in the newspapers.[2]

Purpose

This is a case study that attempts to gain insight into the dynamics of journalism practiced during controversy by embarking upon difficult and rarely chartered terrain: the thoughts, the feelings, the "mind-sets" of those involved. The study is concerned with accuracy, but unlike most work of this nature, which gauge accuracy by applying tests of internal and external validity to journalistic accounts, this study focuses upon the influence of personal factors in a charged situation.

Such a situation is examined here. It centers on the refusal of O'Hair's son, Bill, to participate in prayer and Bible exercises in his Baltimore schools during the early 1960s. This refusal became news and the issue in court cases that lead to the banning of compulsory prayer in public schools in a 1963 decision by the United States Supreme Court.

Method

The Baltimore Morning Sun and the Baltimore Evening Sun were read for all of 1960 through 1962, the period when events unfolded in Baltimore. Most of the copy written about the situation during this period was produced by three reporters: Steve Nordlinger (who had the education beat) and Charles Flowers for the morning paper, and Michael Naver for the evening paper. The three reporters were interviewed by telephone, as was O'Hair. Each was asked to "recollect in tranquility" the controversy in general, specific events and stories, and their inner thoughts and feelings. Each was informed that the others were being interviewed and that the material obtained in the interviews would be attributed directly and used in an article to be submitted for publication.

Coverage and Comment

The first story about the O'Hairs, "Boy, 14, Balks at Bible Reading," was written by Steve Nordlinger for the Morning Sun, Oct. 27, 1960.[3] The headline well describes the subject matter of the story. However, the copy contained the full text of a report about the Soviet Union that Bill Murray had written for one of his classes during the previous semester. The inclusion of the report, which was in no way related to Bill's refusal to participate in Bible reading, clearly implied that the beliefs held by Bill and his mother concerning atheism were related to communism.

When asked about the use of Bill's report on the Soviet Union in his story, Nordlinger replied: "I did not suspect her son was a communist. I thought the paper was interesting, although I'm not sure how relevant. I do not recall exactly why it was mentioned, but a lot of details are sometimes put in stories that do not always pertain. In retrospect, maybe it should have been omitted if it suggested communist leanings."[4]

Michael Naver, the Evening Sun reporter, believes that there was "always a suspicion that she was a communist."[5]

Nordlinger, now working in the Sun's Washington, D.C., bureau did not at first ask O'Hair to explain her beliefs about atheism because:

> I do not think that was part of the story. If I had been doing a profile of her I might have, but in the early 60s those stories were not as much a part of journalism as they are now. The initial story was not considered that big a deal at the time. It was a good story written by me as education reporter, but no one realized at the time how far it would go. I'm not even sure there was that much follow-up after the first article. I don't recall really pursuing the story.[6]

No matter which account of the trial is closer to what transpired, it is true that in their coverage of events the two papers gave much more space to statements by authority than to the views of O'Hair, Bill or their attorneys. A prototypical example is the July 15, 1962, article written by Charles Flowers for the Morning Sun, headlined, "City Answers Mrs. Murray in Bible Case."[16]

This 15-inch, one-column story devotes about five inches of quotations to opponents of O'Hair, but none to her, though Flowers interviewed O'Hair for the article.[17] More than two inches of the quotations are taken from the city solicitor's legal briefs. The last line of the copy states, "Mrs. Murray's attorneys have already filed their brief," but nothing is written about its contents.

Flowers, when interviewed, said that O'Hair was "funny to talk to." He noted that though he shared her views about prayer in public schools, "She's a weirdo. She's an absolute nut."[18]

In contrast, Nordlinger came the closest of the three reporters to professing something of a liking for O'Hair. He said that he always got along well with the family.[19]

Naver remains impressed with O'Hair's statement that she did not object to genuine religion, but rather religiosity.[20] He did not include such a statement, however, in any of his articles.

Naver described the O'Hair he wrote about in the 1960s as an unattractive, even obnoxious individual. She "was regarded as a freak," he said, as well as "a semi-hysterical housewife looking for a cause." Being assigned to the controversy "was like covering a circus sideshow." In assessing the opinions held by his fellow journalists at the time, he said, "Maybe we didn't believe there was a real person there." "I don't believe she accomplished anything."[21]

O'Hair feels that three factors controlled what was written about her in the Baltimore press: (1) reporters were intent upon using the controversy to "make a name for themselves"; (2) reporters had to follow the instructions of their publishers; and (3) reporters could not escape their own religious biases, even when they were not practicing "religionists," because they were born into a "religious culture."[22]

Because of these factors, O'Hair believes the coverage of the story was "one-sided"; i.e., anti-atheism and pro-religion, or, to put it another way, anti-dissident and pro-authority. Moreover, she feels that she and her son were never regarded by the press as individuals, as human beings. She complained, for instance, that the papers did not report continual vandalism to their home and property.[23]

Summary and Discussion

Even a casual reading of the Baltimore Sun's 1960-1962 coverage of the controversy clearly shows imbalance in the disproportionate amount of space given to representatives of authority (schools, courts, government) and proponents of school prayer compared to the relative paucity of space alloted to O'Hair, Bill and opponents of school prayer. There is also distortion, beginning with the Sun's first story, which linked atheism with an irrelevant issue, communism.

Such inadequacies are manifest in the lack of quoted material attributed to O'Hair, who was then, as she is now, talkative; in the failure to fully investigate the truth of her allegations; and in the failure to adequately explicate the nature of atheism, the philosophical and deeply felt basis for O'Hair's and Bill's actions, while implying that their motivation was political -- that they did what they did because they were communists.

How do these matters relate to the purpose of this study: to examine the influence of personal factors in the coverage of controversy? What can we learn about the dynamics of the reporting process, particularly the influence of the mind-sets of journalists Nordlinger, Naver and Flowers as they related to their chief subject, O'Hair? Several things.

One was the quickness of the press to find a stereotype for what they did not fully understand, dissent in the form of atheism. Such labeling, in fact, seemed to substitute for the effort to understand. O'Hair's views are deviant, occasionally complex, and for many, unfamiliar. In addition, they carry an "emotional loading" that has elicited strong responses from those whose own values are challenged. Implicit in the remarks of the three reporters is the belief that O'Hair's actions in Baltimore stemmed from an intolerance of Christianity, a perception which in its turn lessened their tolerance of her stance. Nordlinger, Naver and Flowers understandably may not have fully comprehended O'Hair's position and motivation, but they did not exert themselves to become informed about a subject that was central to their stories.

Another factor is that personal dislike of O'Hair interfered with the professional judgment of Naver and Flowers. Nordlinger, as noted earlier, thought better of O'Hair than did his colleagues. O'Hair's reputation for confrontation is not undeserved, but whatever her manner, no matter how strange or abrasive Naver and Flowers perceived it to be, they were unable to separate their dislike of her as a person from the newsworthiness of her actions.

Moreover, the portrayal of O'Hair and her son by all of the reporters is uni-dimensional; i.e., the two are portrayed as dissidents in their roles during a series of legal confrontations. What is missing is a sense of them as people. This omission is one of O'Hair's major complaints:

> For example, I was called into my supervisor's office. I was fired from my employment. I was totally done with employment. I had to manufacture a new job with an atheist organization. I tried to go to newspapers again and again.
>
> What is the duty of newspaper reporters? Twenty reporters watched while my son was beaten and did nothing.[24]

O'Hair was an attorney and a psychiatric social worker before she became famous. She took patriotic pride in her service as a cryptographer during World War II. Bill was an active, bright teenager. At times the two were treated brutally by their neighbors. The bond between mother and son, already exceptional, was strengthened by their shared experiences in the controversy.

O'Hair and Bill were written about in terms of the issues they raised, as symbols in a confrontation. In this adherence to prevalent "objective" standards of reporting, the mother and son were dehumanized. They were presented to the Sun's readers as creatures devoid of those personal qualities that might have brought them, if not support, at least understanding and compassion.

Finally, O'Hair's assertions about the press coverage in Baltimore, while seemingly plausible on some macro-level, are not apparent in the copy of Nordlinger, Naver and Flowers. There is no evidence that any of them sought to use the controversy for self-aggrandizement or was slavish to his publisher. And while each does appear to be "culture bound," so are most of us, including O'Hair, who may be seen -- and indeed does see herself -- as among the most American of Americans, part of a proud tradition of dissent and diversity in a democratic culture. The reporters did have shortcomings that resulted in unfair treatment of O'Hair. However, the key issue is not so much the limiting effects of culture upon the press, which is a given in any situation, but rather the ability of professional journalists to put aside their prejudices so that they may report with accuracy and fairness.

In closing, gratitude must be expressed to Mrs. Madalyn Murray O'Hair and Mssrs. Steve Nordlinger, Michael Naver and Charles Flowers for the interviews they provided -- and to the serendipity that kept this quartet, principals in an event that took place more than a quarter of a century ago, alive, well and so open to questions. Mrs. O'Hair responded thoughtfully and fully, in spite of having to recall some extremely painful moments. And the three Sun reporters, in their willingness to give of themselves in order to provide the benefits of experience to colleagues, demonstrate allegiance to the highest professional standards.

#

Footnotes

1. Austin, Texas: American Atheist Press, 1970.

2. Ibid., pp. 54-57.

3. P. 22, local section.

4. Steve Nordlinger to Jim Bowman, telephone interview, Nov. 20, 1987.

5. Michael Naver to Jim Bowman, telephone interview, Nov. 22, 1987.

6. Nordlinger to Bowman, op. cit.

7. Madalyn Murray O'Hair, op. cit. (statement in full), pp. 142-143. "Mrs. Murray Asks Court To Halt School Exercises," Dec. 8, 1960, p. 28 (portion printed in Sun.

8. Naver to Bowman, op. cit.

9. "Atheist Charges Teachers Harass and Abuse Her Son," p. 9.

10. Naver to Bowman, op. cit.

11. Nordlinger to Bowman, op. cit.

12. "Those Who Taunted Atheist Told To Respect Others' Beliefs," p. 44, no byline.

Footnotes Continued

13. O'Hair, op. cit., pp. 239-241.

14. Ibid., pp. 242-244.

15. Ibid., p. 244.

16. P. 15, local section.

17. Charles Flowers to Jim Bowman, telephone interview, Dec. 1, 1987.

18. Ibid.

19. Nordlinger to Bowman, op. cit.

20. Naver to Bowman, op. cit.

21. Ibid.

22. O'Hair to Jim Bowman, telephone interview, Nov. 15, 1987.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.